

The Trident Test Failure

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The failed test of a Trident II D5 missile by the British Submarine, Vengeance, as reported in the [Sunday Times](#) on 22nd January, has re-opened the British nuclear deterrent debate. This debate was supposed to be [settled in July](#), where a Parliamentary debate to affirm the UK's commitment, interpreted as a greenlight to continue procurement and planning for the Dreadnought class of submarines, passed with a sizable majority. Opponents of Trident are now trying to hold the Prime Minister accountable for withholding the information from Parliament.

These missiles are the sole delivery system for British nuclear weapons and the delivery system for sea leg of the US Triad of ground-, air- and sea-based deterrents. Lockheed Martin is responsible for manufacturing the missiles and prepares their configurations for testing. These tests are not quite routine, but have occurred every few years since 1989, when the missile first became available. The last successful UK test was in 2012 and the last successful test was in [March 2016](#) by an US Ohio class submarine. In total there have been [160 successful flight tests](#) of this missile.

The Defence Secretary Michael Fallon [appeared before the House of Commons](#) on 23rd January 2017 to speak on the issue. Fallon stated that “HMS Vengeance and her crew were successfully tested and certified as ready to rejoin the operational cycle”. This was a statement about the purpose of the operation, to test Vengeance after a refurbishment. The test was a Demonstration and Shakedown Operation (DASO), such as the test carried out on [31st August 2016 by the USS Maryland](#), also with a Trident II D5 to certify the crew and vessel to return to operation. Fallon did not reveal any more information stating “We do not comment of the detail of submarine operations.” This does not preclude when a test is successful, when [information](#) is regularly released. Fallon addressed this by stating this was discussed “case by case” based on “national

security considerations”. Fallon also stated that Government would not have put the motion before the house if it did not have confidence in the deterrent.

Other notable contributions:

- Julian Lewis stated that ‘the deterrent needs to be shrouded in secrecy and it also needs to deter’. If there is no ‘strategic significance’ in this launch failure then it is better to be ‘frank’ and disclose more information.
- SNP’s Brendan O’Hara described Trident as ‘neither credible nor capable’.
- Tom Brake: “For members of this house to be able to debate the merits of trident or its like for like replacement effectively we need timely security appropriate information and we did not get it in this case.”
- Michael Gove equated UK nuclear deterrent as congruent with membership of UN Security Council.

During the debate it emerged that a US defense official had [told CNN](#) that the missile veered towards the US coast in a trajectory that was part of an automatic self-destruct sequence. The official is quoted as stating “the missile was diverted into the ocean to self-destruct –an automatic procedure the missile electronics detect an anomaly.” This statement clearly undermines the entirety of Fallon’s testimony to the House of Commons and policy to not discuss ‘operational details’ in the House. Fallon repeatedly told the House not to believe the newspaper’s account, despite apparent independent confirmation, unless the source is common.

This story is not yet over.